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ABSTRACT

At all levels in the Kingdom of Thailand, education has played various roles in the country's war on illiteracy. A strong commitment by the Thai government combined with a social value structure which has supported the concept of education has helped the people of Thailand achieve a near 90% literacy rate. To provide a model for similar countries to approach the problems of illiteracy and formal schooling, this report describes the process of educational development in Thailand. Taking into account Thai culture, natural resources, and the existing economy, the structure of Thai education has been carefully developed to allow disadvantaged students equal opportunity to learn and partake in higher education. In addition to structured education in traditional schools, non-formal education is offered through radio programming, television courses, and correspondence education. Approximately 80% of the Thai population is involved in nonformal education in rural and poor areas and in regions with few schools. Thailand operates special schools for handicapped and disadvantaged students; however, mainstreaming is appreciated and utilized selectively. These special and welfare education programs tend to be unique to Thailand, but preface a model of education that can be applied to other developing countries. Numerous teachers' colleges prepare teachers to meet the demands of the non-formal education and special education. Components for educational structure development based on the Thai model are: (1) assessing the culture and climate of the community; (2) centralizing control of the educational program; (3) recognizing and supporting special education programs; (4) making provisions to sustain growth; and (5) obtaining government support. (KS)

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Education in Thailand: A Model for Developing Countries?

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Abstract

Education, at all levels in the Kingdom of Thailand, has played various roles in the country's war on illiteracy. A strong commitment by the Thai government combined with a social value structure which has supported the concept of education has helped the people of Thailand achieve a near 90% literacy rate.

Taking into account Thai culture, natural resources, and the existing economy, the structure of Thai education has been carefully developed to allow disadvantaged students equal opportunity to learn and partake in higher education. These special and welfare education programs tend to be unique to Thailand, and preface a model of education which can be applied to other developing countries. This model calls for the coordinating agency to assess the culture and climate of the community, centralize control of the educational program, recognize and support special education programs, make provisions to sustain growth, and obtain governmental support.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the Kingdom of Thailand has experienced not only an economic revolution which has placed it on the verge of the industrialized world, but has also set the pace for educational innovation for developing countries. This innovation can be illustrated through a variety of mechanisms, but it is crystalized by studying the literacy rate in Thailand. As the Kingdom approaches the 1990's with almost a 90% literacy rate, Thailand has become second only to Japan in terms of literacy for all Asian countries.

While some of this success is related to the government's continued commitment to education, credit also needs to be directed at the social values of the Thai people. This strong moral and social structure, exemplified by the high regard held for the present King Bhumidol Adulyadej, is interwoven with the belief in and practice of Hinayana Buddhism by 95% of the Thai population. This religion has also done its share of encouraging literacy by combining the image of the "Teacher" into it's Doctrine for the past 700 years.

Despite these simplistic statements which attempt to overview Thailand and preface a more detailed discussion of the success of Thai education, it is clear that the Kingdom of Thailand is in a unique position among developing countries. The observations made in this writing are only the first steps in understanding and appreciating different structures of education throughout the world. These comments are by no means definitive, yet are of crucial importance as the United States and developing nations throughout the world move toward global interdependence. The steps taken by Thailand as described here have the ability to provide a model for similar countries to approach the problems of illiteracy and formal schooling.

Thailand: The Country

Thailand currently has a population of some 52 million, with six million residing in the country's capital, Bangkok. Thailand is bordered by Burma in the west, Laos and Cambodia in the north and east, and Malaysia in the south. As a constitutional monarchy, Thailand is the only country in southeast Asia which maintained its independence during the colonial period when western powers dominated the region. This constitutional monarchy concept has allowed Thailand to survive as a capitalistic country and has fostered a multi-party political system which exists in harmony with the King.

Today, the Thai economy remains independent through a heavy mix of foreign investors, and utilizes natural and raw resources to lure economic development projects. Throughout the 1980's, the Thai economy has been made up of a combination of agriculture, industry, forestry, and most recently, tourism. Rice, rubber, maize, and tapioca products lead the list of agricultural products exported, and the production of construction materials, garments, chemicals and chemical products, and engine assembly have been the primary industrial operations (Foreign News Division, Office of the Prime Minister, 1982). The Thai economy was so successful in 1987, that it led all of Southeast Asia in terms of its gross domestic product (GDP) which was $32.9 billion. As such, Bangkok and the rest of Thailand have become competitors with Hong Kong and Singapore for economic supremacy in the area.

For the rest of Southeast Asia, Malaysia which claims to have almost a 75% literacy rate, followed Thailand closely with a GDP of $25.37 billion. Vietnam, with a 16% literacy rate among adults, had a GDP of $9 billion, Burma claimed a 34% literacy rate and a GDP of $5.7 billion, and Thailand's other neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, have both claimed literacy rates at approximately 45%, and GDP's of $600 million and $650 million

respectively.

First under rule by King Rama I, the history of Thailand is filled with confrontations with neighboring countries, which at one point led to the devastation of Thailand's second capital, Ayuthya. While King Ramas II through V were all advocates of more open trade, Rama VI, an Oxford graduate, was one of the most progressive leaders in terms of developing education. Although his most noted accomplishment was the gaining his country admittance to the League of Nations after World War I, his reign was also witness to the creation of Thailand's first university at Chulalongkorn in 1917 (Highlights of Thailand, 1987).

Also of importance in understanding Thailand's role in Asia is the rich Thai cultural background. Under the auspices of the Fine Arts Department, the country has preserved a history which has emphasized architecture, sculpture, and paintings. These arts have been primarily reflective of a religious orientation. No description of Thai culture would be complete without placing special emphasis on the many lavish Buddhist temples which populate the country. Examples of such architecture include the structures of Phra Chedi, Bot and Vihara, Phra Prang, Mondop and Pra Sat (Bhirasri, 1988).

Although woods generally form the base of all roofing, and some decoration, most temples are filled with glass mosaic, gold-leaves, porcelain, stucco, lacquer, and to a lesser extent, inlaid pearls. The techniques used in creating these architectural masterpieces have been revived in the 1980's by special order of Her Majesty the Queen. This directive was developed to create an awareness among the Thai people of the "treasures belonging to the nation" (Bunyasingh, 1987).

Also of special note is the lack of emphasis on unique Thai literature. From a historical perspective, most existing work has focused on religious interpretations, while the historically more diverse and subject-varing original works were destroyed with Ayuthya in 1767. Despite the lack of this humanities base, educational programming has

had a great deal of success in expanding the social sciences and has come to fruition after only 70 years of implementation.

Thai Education: Structure and Success

The structure of education in Thailand is based on independent pre-school, six years of primary education, and six years of secondary school divided into lower secondary and upper secondary sections. Higher education, which is selective based on national exam test scores, consists of bachelor's degree work and lower, and post-baccalaureate degree work. Many Thai students, however, fall under the classification of disabled or disadvantaged. The existing structure provides special education programming for these students, and still allows the students an equal opportunity to enter Thai state universities.

A unique parallel to this structured education is the non-formal educational offerings by both the Department of Non Formal Education and over 40 support agencies. Early non-formal education was implemented by Buddhist monks throughout the country until the passing of a formal act of government allocating money and programs for non-formal education in 1940. Today, approximately 80 percent of the Thai population is involved in out-of-school education programs in rural and poor areas and those parts of the country with few schools. These programs have utilized a great deal of radio programming, television course offerings, and correspondence education. With this flexibility, the Department of Non Formal Education has been highly successful in recruiting participation by minority populations.

To meet these new unique needs, teacher education has evolved to meet the demands which have been placed on the educational structure by traditional schools, non-formal education, and special education programs. Originally developed in 1895,

elementary teacher certification began with a three year course designed to teach future teachers the basics of education theory. As of 1981, there were 36 teacher's colleges throughout Thailand. The curriculum in these programs not only stresses essential teaching skills, but also places a great deal of importance on the personality of the future teacher so that they will fit in harmoniously with the Thai culture (Department of Teacher Education, 1980).

Outside of the teacher's colleges, there are currently 12 public universities and 21 private colleges approved by the Ministry of University Affairs. These institutions of higher education offer master's degree level work at ten universities, and doctoral work at five universities (NIBID, 1987). A great deal of these universities structures, philosophies, and operations have been adopted through both contracts with American higher education and from the observation of United States educational consultants. Similarities as basic as student personnel services have been identified and developed through the use of American professional educators.

Perhaps the most innovative, unique, and also the most overlooked aspect of Thai education are the previously mentioned provisions created to facilitate special and welfare education. Instead of taking the attitude that all children, regardless of skill, be mainstreamed, the government has created numerous schools and institutes for various forms of special populations. For example, in 1987 eight schools were in operation solely for deaf children, two schools were operated only for blind students, etc. There are also centers and hospitals for the more severely handicapped which offer various levels of education. Twenty-two additional schools have been formed for the socially and culturally handicapped children (i.e. children of the slum, hilltribes, children of lepers, etc.).

Despite this segregation, mainstreaming is still appreciated and utilized selectively. Students in special and welfare education programs are monitored, and when applicable,

they are mainstreamed into schools with non-specialized populations which have been especially equipped to facilitate the students handicap.

Vocational education has also been a subject of growing interest both as an actual concentration of study and as an educational option for Thai students. Coordinated by the Department of Vocational Education and the institute of Technology and Vocational Education, up to eight levels of study are possible. These range from basic vocational, "semi-skilled" programs, to the more intricate vocational teacher training segments which result in the earning of a degree (NIBID, 1987).

Despite what may appear to be a very segmented approach to national education, the Thai government's tight control over the various components has maintained an equilibrium which has allowed the literacy rate in this Southeastern Asian country to soar. Based on this success, other countries with similar characteristics and resources can learn from this successful educational philosophy.

The following steps have been developed as suggestions to educational program developers to consider when designing the actual structure for instruction. Curriculum design has been excluded due to the unique needs, such as vocational and basic literacy needs, of each country.

Model Components for Educational Structure Development

1. **Cultural Assessment**. Every culture is unique with a different set of mores and standards to live by. It is inconceivable that any educational programs be developed without understanding basic "living" principles of the country's people. Part of the success of the Thai educational structure is the strong support and belief in education by the sect of Buddhism practiced.

2. **Centralized Control of Programs**. Much like the military in many countries, centralized control of education allows for an objective body or individual to evaluate and adjust segments of the educational programs. As Thailand success

demonstrates, with a unified approach to education, for example, secondary education will not be manipulated until and unless the ramifications on higher education have been studied. Additionally, such an alteration would also warrant a review of the effects on the teacher's colleges. So by unifying the final decision making, all components are considered.

3. **Address Special Populations Upfront**. In any given society, and especially in developing countries, special populations in the forms of both mental and physical handicaps as well as "welfare" children exist. It is the responsibility of education's coordinating agency at some point to address these unique needs. Thailand confronted this issue in the beginning of its structural development and made special allowances in the program to facilitate transitions in-to and out-of the special programs. Unfortunately, the United States did not take such precautionary measures, and ended up reacting to special populations in a less than direct manner. Therefore, in developing educational structures, provisions for rural, welfare, slum, and physically and mentally disabled students needs to be made in the beginning.

4. **Growth Sustaining Mechanisms**. No projections in developing countries for educational needs can always be anticipated correctly, so any new structure needs to have built into it a provision which will allow for growth. This includes not merely physical facilities, but also alludes to such essential pieces as teachers and administrators. Thai educational leadership had the foresight to develop the Teacher's Colleges which have allowed for a smooth transition during times of growth and change.

5. **Governmental Support**. Despite concerns of the instability of many developing countries governance, it is a complete necessity to have the support of the government in power. This allows not only for additional monies to be allocated in "need be" situations, but also lends credibility and non-monetary resources to the

structure. Although rather unique, the Thai model worked ideally by mixing the love of a King with the love and support for education.

Conclusions

Thailand is a unique kingdom and leader in not only Asian countries but throughout the Third World. As such, the success in education as evidenced by the near 90 percent literacy rate provides many suggestions for the creation and growth of similarly developing nation's educational structures. As such, the history and current status of Thai education can be broken down into various components to develop a model for similar developing countries. Described earlier, the model pieces include cultural assessment, centralized control of education, confrontation of special populations, mechanism development for sustained growth, and governmental support.

In providing this model, it can be concluded that Thailand, as both a receptor of American educational consultants and unique in-country educational program development, has performed well in tailoring an education program to meet the country's independent needs. Additionally, such success speaks well for the existing moral values and social climate in Thailand.

As Thailand evolves from an undiscovered, exotic paradise to a commercial tourist attraction, it is hoped by the authors along with many educators throughout the world that the structure which succeed in educating an entire country can withstand the advances of a western dominated tourist front. Only in doing so can the success of this model be tracked and advocated for similar educational programs.

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